

FIVE ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

for Starting School Improvement Right

BY VICTORIA L. BERNHARDT

Have you ever been really excited to start a lesson or project with a group of students only to discover they were at a different place than you expected with their understanding of the topic? If you were lucky, you were able to quickly fill in the blanks so you could begin the project with all students having the same basic understandings. Strong teachers learn to assess students to understand what they know and what they do not know; and as a result, projects and lessons are taught at the appropriate level and completed on time.

STARTING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANNING THE RIGHT WAY

Everywhere, schools are looking at their high stakes assessment reports, focusing on the students who did not achieve proficiency, and then adapting current school improvement plans to “fix” these students—hoping to get different results. Most often, we see these adjustments being the *addition* of after school programs, before school programs, and/or tutoring programs. Can these strategies increase student achievement in the next year? Yes, they can. Will they be systemic; meaning, will they impact the whole system and last over time? Probably not. Is there another way to think about getting and sustaining student achievement increases and starting school improvement? Absolutely.

Let’s think big—let’s go for student achievement increases in every grade level and subject area, and with every student group—each year. Here is what has to happen for such increases to occur—especially in the first year.

The first thing is to adjust school improvement thinking from focusing on the students who are not achieving to focusing on improvement strategies that will impact all students and all teachers. In order to do this, schools must gather and analyze data that will help them understand where they are now, why they are getting the results they are getting, and, if they are not happy with current results, figure out how to get different results.

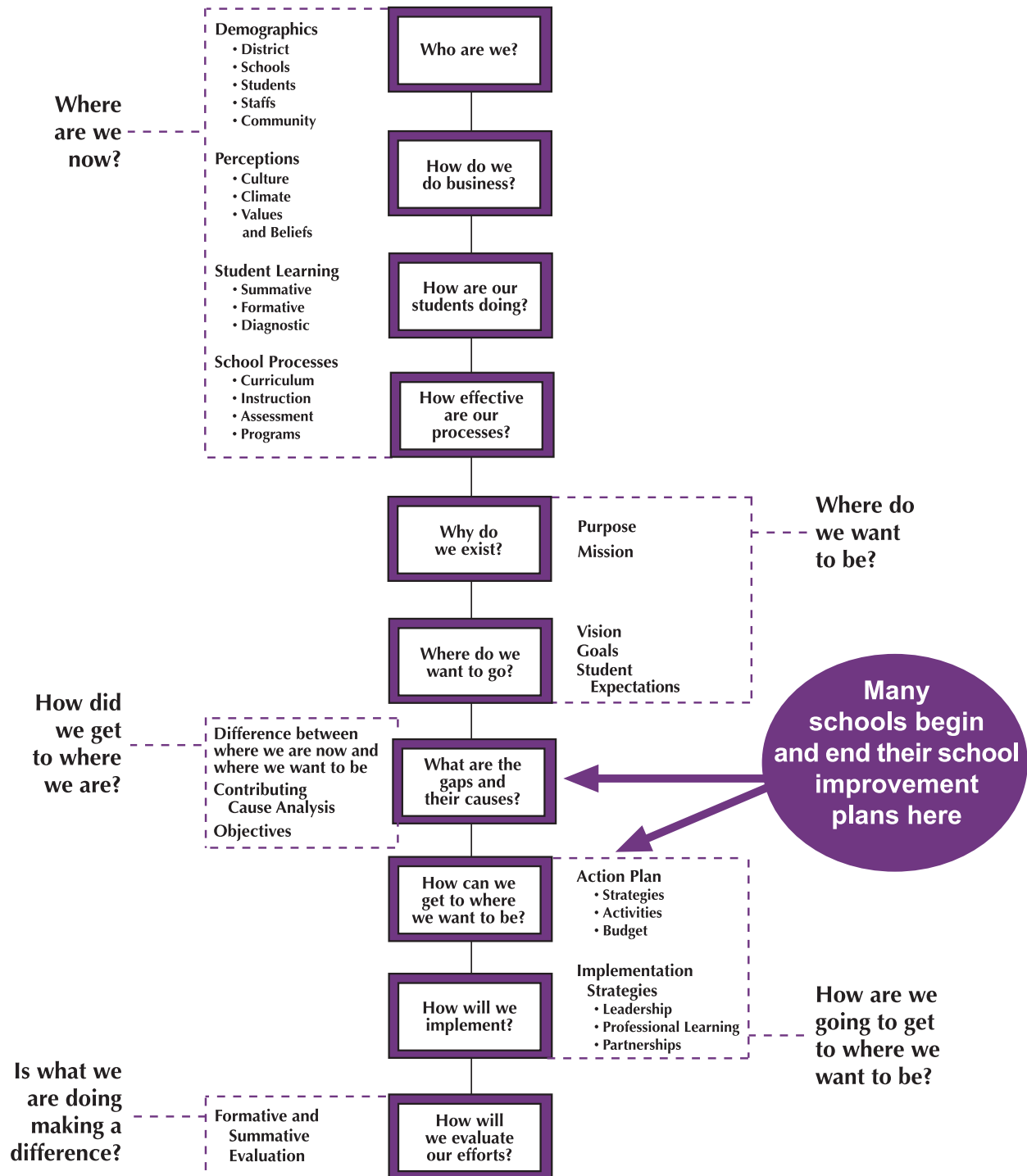
FIVE ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Five essential and logical questions must be answered with data to create a plan that will make a difference for all students and all teachers, and get student achievement increases across the board each year (see Figure 1).

- ◆ Where are we now?
- ◆ Where do we want to be?
- ◆ How did we get to where we are now?
- ◆ How are we going to get to where we want to be?
- ◆ Is what we are doing making a difference?

Figure 1

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANNING



These questions are described below, along with why it is important to look at the appropriate data.

Where Are We Now?

Knowing where a school is right now is the part of school improvement planning that requires a comprehensive and honest look at all the school's data—not just student learning results. Four sub questions need to be answered about *Where are we now?*

- ◆ Who are we?
- ◆ How do we do business?
- ◆ How are our students doing?
- ◆ How effective are our processes?

Who Are We?

It is important to understand student and community demographics because it is the students whose needs we must meet. Student characteristics change as communities change. Demographic information can help teachers understand their professional learning needs, and can help schools place appropriate teachers with students, hire strategically and effectively, and ensure a continuum of learning. All of these data must be considered as staff members create a continuous improvement plan that will make a difference for all of their students.

Attendance, behavior, and program enrollment are demographic data that provide information about whom we have as students, as well as give us insight into our leadership philosophies, and about how we move students within our system. Questions to consider: *Who are the students that are placed in special education, gifted, and advanced placement programs, and why? Who are the students who are not attending school, or who are being disciplined, and why? What do our current program numbers reflect?*

What do we want these numbers to be? As staff, what do we need to learn to understand who our students are, and how they learn best?

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How Do We Do Business?

The question, *How do we do business?*, is answered through assessing the school's culture, climate, and organizational processes. Staff values and beliefs, most often assessed through questionnaires and/or determined during visioning processes, tell a staff if team building or specific professional learning is necessary and what is possible to implement.

Student and parent questionnaires can add different perspectives to the information generated from staff data. Students can report what it takes for them to learn and how they are being taught and treated. A schoolwide self-assessment can provide an overview of where the staff believes the school is on the measures that make a difference for school improvement. These assessments often surprise administrators who may think all staff members are thinking about school in the same way. If a school staff does not know how it really does business, it could be creating plans that might never be implemented.

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How Are Our Students Doing?

The next data question, *How are our students doing?*, requires a synthesis of student learning data in all subject areas, disaggregated by all student groups, by grade levels, and by following the same groups of students (cohorts) overtime. These data tell whether schools are meeting the needs of all student groups and uncover strengths and areas for improvement.

How Effective Are Our Processes?

School processes include curriculum, instruction and assessment strategies, leadership, and programs. These are the elements of our organizations over which we have almost complete control, but we tend to measure these elements the least. Answering this question calls for a complete accounting and evaluation of all programs and processes operating throughout the learning organization, as well as the insurance of effective teachers using data to continually improve their teaching strategies.

Where Do We Want To Be?

A school defines its destination through its mission, vision, goals, and standards—aligned with the district’s vision, goals, and standards which, in turn, are aligned with the state vision, goals, and standards. Without a vision, a school’s collective efforts have no target.

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How Did We Get To Where We Are?

Gaps are determined by synthesizing the differences between the results the school is getting with its current processes, and the results the school wants to get. Contributing cause analyses, along with data analysis, help schools understand how they got their current results, and what it will take to eliminate the gaps.

How Are We Going To Get To Where We Want To Be?

The answer to *How can we get to where we want to be?* is key to unlocking how the vision will be implemented and how gaps will be eliminated. An action plan, consisting of goals, objectives, strategies, activities, person(s) responsible, due dates, timelines, and required resources, needs to be developed to implement and achieve the vision and goals and to eliminate the contributing causes of the gaps.

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Is What We Are Doing Making A Difference?

Ongoing evaluation is required to assess the alignment of all parts of the system to the vision, and to determine if what a school is doing is making a difference for students.

SUMMARY

Too often, school staffs study the gaps that appear in the high stakes test scores of students and immediately determine solutions for their undesirable results. Consequently, the solutions most often involve “fixing” the students, and do not include process improvement or targeted professional learning for staff related to the consistent implementation of a vision.

When staffs begin their school improvement efforts by reviewing all their data and creating a vision, they know what professional learning is required to get all staff implementing the vision and improving student learning in every grade level, subject area, and with every student group.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Victoria L. Bernhardt, Ph.D., is Executive Director of the *Education for the Future Initiative*, a not-for-profit organization whose mission is to build the capacity of all learning organizations at all levels to gather, analyze, and use data to continuously improve learning for all students. She is also a Professor (currently on leave) in the Department of Professional Studies in Education, College of Communication and Education, at California State University, Chico. Dr. Bernhardt is the author of the following books:

- ▼ *From Questions to Actions: Using Questionnaire Data for Continuous School Improvement* (2009) (with Bradley J. Geise) describes how to create, administer, analyze, and use questionnaires as a tool to improve teaching strategies, programs, and learning organizations.
- ▼ *Data, Data Everywhere: Bringing All the Data Together for Continuous School Improvement* (2009) is an easy-to-read primer that is conversational and accessible. This book will help your faculty and staff become comfortable with using data to drive a continuous school improvement process.
- ▼ *Translating Data into Information to Improve Teaching and Learning* (2007) helps educators think through the selection of meaningful data elements and effective data tools and strengthens their understanding of how to increase the quality of data and data reports at each educational level.
- ▼ A four-book collection of using data to improve student learning—*Using Data to Improve Student Learning in Elementary Schools* (2003); *Using Data to Improve Student Learning in Middle Schools* (2004); *Using Data to Improve Student Learning in High Schools* (2005); and *Using Data to Improve Student Learning in School Districts* (2006). Each book shows real analyses focused on one education organizational level and provides templates on an accompanying CD-Rom for leaders to use for gathering, graphing, and analyzing data in their own learning organizations.
- ▼ *Data Analysis for Continuous School Improvement* (First Edition, 1998; Second Edition, 2004) helps learning organizations use data to determine where they are, where they want to be, and how to get there—sensibly, painlessly, and effectively.
- ▼ *The School Portfolio Toolkit: A Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation Guide for Continuous School Improvement*, and CD-Rom (2002), is a compilation of over 500 examples, suggestions, activities, tools, strategies, and templates for producing school portfolios that will lead to continuous school improvement.
- ▼ *The Example School Portfolio* (2000) shows what a completed school portfolio looks like and further supports schools in developing their own school portfolios.
- ▼ *The School Portfolio: A Comprehensive Framework for School Improvement* (First Edition, 1994; Second Edition, 1999). This first book by the author assists schools with clarifying the purpose and vision of their learning organizations as they develop their school portfolios.

Dr. Bernhardt is passionate about her mission of helping all educators continuously improve student learning in their classrooms, their schools, their districts, and states by gathering, analyzing, and using actual data—as opposed to using hunches and “gut-level” feelings. She has made numerous presentations at professional meetings and conducts workshops on the school portfolio, data analysis, data warehousing, and school improvement at local, state, regional, national, and international levels.

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